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SUBJECT: IRAQ PRESIDENT JALAL TALABANI'S VISIT TO CZECH
REPUBLIC IS HEAVY ON SYMBOLISM BUT LIGHT ON SUBSTANCE

Classified By: Political Officer Scott Harney for reasons 1.4 (b+d).

1. (C) Summary. Iraqi President Talabani's visit to Prague focused on symbolism and achieved little in the way of concrete improvements to the robust Czech-Iraqi relations. The GOCR promised to continue supporting transition efforts, and will take steps to increase business ties. Negotiations are planned for late October on debt forgiveness. FM Svoboda intends to visit Baghdad early next year. The Iraqis are apparently interested in purchasing Czech-made L-159 subsonic fighter aircraft. Talabani praised Czech-Iraqi ties and the work of the coalition in Iraq. End summary

2. (SBU) Iraqi President Jalal Talabani chose to begin his first state visit to Europe since he took office with the Czech Republic. Prague remains for Talabani a potent symbol of democracy; the Czechs hosted Talabani when he was a student activist trying to explain the cause of democracy in his country. The Czech again sponsored him when he was a "Peshmergah," fighting for freedom and democracy in Iraq. So, when he arrived on October 3 for a three-day visit as Iraq's first democratically elected president, he was expecting a bit more interest than he received.

3. (C) Members of the Iraqi Embassy privately expressed their disappointment with their perception that the Czech response to his visit was less than enthusiastic. Thamer al-Adhami, Minister Counselor at the Czech Embassy in Prague said that the embassy felt that the Czech response was a bit cool. Adhami said that attendance was poor at the events and said that he did not feel that the press coverage was sufficient. Indeed, except for Wednesday's edition of Czech daily newspaper Lidove Noviny, the Talabani visit stayed off the front pages of Czech newspapers. Privately, many Czechs bristled at the comparison of Iraq's fight for democracy with the Czech "Velvet Revolution." During an official luncheon sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Talabani reportedly joked that democracy caused Czechoslovakia to split apart, but said that he hoped that in Iraq democracy will bring unity. Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Cyril Svoboda coolly answered that it was not democracy that split former Czechoslovakia, but there were many deeper, historical causes.

4. (SBU) As for substance of the meetings, Al-Adhami said that he was satisfied, saying it was primarily a courtesy visit. Talabani did not discuss any sensitive issues, including the issue of Iraq's debt to Prague. The 26-member delegation instead met with government and business leaders to encourage Czech business participation in Iraq. Talabani noted that at a recent trade fair in Kurdistan, no Czech companies attended, primarily due to security concerns. Al-Adhami said that the Czech government has allocated funds for the reconstruction of Iraq, particularly for projects that the Czechs had originally been involved with, including a tractor factory and oil refinery in Basra. However, Al-Adhami said that biggest challenge has been to get the Iraqi side to make use of the allocations.

5. (SBU) At a state dinner on October 3, Talabani spoke warmly of Czech support for coalition activity in Iraq, including an explicit call for continued coalition engagement in Iraq. On the second day of his visit to the Czech Republic, President Talabani came down with flu and did not attend several events, including a meeting with the mayor of Prague, as well as a planned meeting with the Iraqi expatriate community in Prague. Despite his illness, Talabani did take time for a private meeting in his hotel room with former Czech President Vaclav Havel on the evening of 4 October. Al-Adhami said that Talabani remains grateful for Havel's support for the opposition movement in Iraq during the reign of Saddam Hussain.

6. (C) Several members of the delegation, led by Iraq Military Advisor General Tawfiq Samara'i, visited the offices of Aero Vodochody, makers of the L-159 subsonic fighter aircraft. The delegation was given a tour of the plant and then given a demonstration of the L-159. Members of the delegation said the visit was very successful, however the embassy would not say whether or not the GOI is interested in purchasing the aircraft (Comment: Embassy Prague has learned from Iraqi Embassy sources that Iraq is examining a possible

purchase of L-159s for its air force. GOCR officials have previously sought USG support for L-159 purchase by the GOI.)

17. (U) During a press conference at Radio Free Europe, Talabani stressed the Kurds will remain in strong alliance with the Shiite and said that he did believe that the Kurds would ever have their own country. He also spoke in support of the controversial ruling by the National Assembly that would require that two-thirds of all registered voters, not just two-thirds of actual voters, to oppose the draft constitution in at least three governorates in order to reject the new constitution in next week's referendum. However, press reports indicated that a few hours later, Iraq's National Assembly contradicted Talabani's statement and voted to reverse this last-minute change, after the United Nations had criticized it as unfair to Iraq's Sunni Arab minority. At one point during the press conference, Talabani was asked in Persian about Iraq's relationship to Iran. Talabani answered that when he was with the opposition, the opposition was friendly to both America and Iran. He said that he was convinced that Iraq today can keep its friendship with two opposite poles at the same time.

18. (C) Pavel Mrazek, Iraq desk officer for the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that other than Talabani's poorly-received joke during the Ministry's luncheon, the Iraq trip was uneventful, though did lay the groundwork for future, substantive meetings. FM Svoboda promised Talabani that he would visit Iraq in early 2006, after the elections. Also, later this month, representatives from the Czech Ministry of Finance plan on meeting with their Iraqi counterparts in Amman, Jordan to discuss the issue of Iraq's debt to the Czech Republic. Mrazek predicted that the GOCR will adopt the recommendations of the Paris Club meeting and cancel 80 percent of Iraq's debt and restructure the remaining amount. The Czech MFA also expressed its intention to open a commercial office in Irbil early next year. Mrazek said that the MFA plans on staffing the office with Iraqi local staff and having the commercial counselor from Czech Embassy in Baghdad regularly visit the office. Mrazek said the MFA assured the Iraqis that the Czech Republic would continue to provide training for Iraqis in numerous fields, particularly law enforcement. (Note: The GOCR has proposed to extend the deployment by nearly 100 military police trainers through 2006, and is confident of parliamentary approval.)
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